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TIMORESE CULTURAL & INFORMATION CENTRE - This Centre is run by a group of East Timorese whose aim is to preserve and promote East Timorese culture in Australia as well as provide information to the Timorese community.
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# OPEN LETTER TO HIS HOLINESS, POPE JOHN PAUL II

from

## THE EAST TIMORESE COMMUNITY OF AUSTRALIA

Your Holiness,

This letter of petition comes to you from the East Timorese community in Australia on the occasion of your historic visit to our second home, our refuge from the tragic conflict in our beloved country.

As the largest community of Timorese outside East Timor, we have earnestly looked forward to your visit as an opportunity to grasp the hand of hope you offer and seek your renewed support for our suffering brothers and sisters in East Timor. To our great disappointment, however, it has not been possible to arrange for our representatives to meet you personally on this occasion.

We had hoped that Monsignor Carlos Belo, who administers the Catholic Church in East Timor on your behalf, would be able to visit Australia as a guest of the Australian Bishops during your tour. When the Australian Bishops declined to issue an invitation to Mgr Belo we wrote twice to Mgr Brian Walsh, the national Papal tour organiser, requesting a few minutes for our community representatives here to meet you, or failing that, to meet with one of your senior aides. The refusal of these requests has left us with no alternative but to address you in the form of this open letter.

Your Holiness, the last ten years have been the blackest in our history. In that short period, over 100,000 East Timorese have died from war and related causes, our way of life has been destroyed, and our fundamental rights to freedom and self-determination trampled on with impunity. This bitter experience has turned our people increasingly to the Church for support and protection as in countries like Poland where identity and traditions are threatened. In East Timor Church membership has doubled.

The Catholic Church recognises East Timor to be a territory in dispute. The Diocese of Dili is administered directly from Rome and run by an Apostolic Administrator. It is not attached to the Indonesian Bishops' Conference.

In 1984 Your Holiness said, 'The Holy See continues to follow the situation in East Timor with preoccupation and with the hope that particular consideration will be given in every circumstance to the ethnic, religious and cultural identity of the people...It is the ardent wish of the Holy See to see that all rights of individuals be

respected and that every effort be made to lighten the sufferings of the people'. Last year your Apostolic Administrator, Mgr Belo, made a special visit to the Vatican to urgently explore ways of resolving the conflict. He reported that Your Holiness had urged him 'to work for the Church, to fight the suffering of the people and to seek for a right solution for peace in Timor'.

Regrettably, however, your words have fallen on deaf ears for the situation is unchanged and a 'right solution for peace' remains an elusive dream.

Inside Timor over 10,000 Indonesian troops continue to press their military campaign and, internationally, governments, with only a few notable exceptions, have abandoned us in their pursuit of commercial and military contracts with Indonesia.

But we refuse to believe that nothing can be done, that a just peace in our country is impossible, that the children of Timor have to submit to another generation of trauma and conflict.

There is an alternative to violence and political expediency and, furthermore, the international community has the means to implement this alternative.

As our spiritual leader, we ask Your Holiness to articulate this alternative once again, firstly by strongly defending our people's rights, including their right as human beings to make their own decisions and to be East Timorese, and then by impressing on the international community the necessity for a just solution based on our internationally recognised right to self-determination.

The only path to peace in Timor is the path of principle. It is our sincere belief that a clear enunciation of these principles by the international Catholic Church, under Your Holiness' leadership, would breath new life into the United Nations process being pursued by the Secretary-General and significantly advance the cause of peace for our people.

The memory of countless dead relatives, friends and patriots and the needs of the living will fill our hearts during attendance at the Masses celebrated by Your Holiness in Australia.

It would be an unforgettable comfort for us and our people in East Timor if, on these occasions, Your Holiness were able to offer a public prayer of petition for East Timor, particularly during your celebration of the Eucharist on 29 November in Darwin, the point in your visit closest to our homeland.

We pray that God will bless your visit to Australia abundantly.

ABEL GUTERRES
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on behalf of the East Timorese Community in Australia.

17 November 1986